

MY DOCUMENTARY PRACTICE IN "IN PLAIN ENGLISH"

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This book grew out of making a videotape about students of color at the University of Oregon. I now would like to retrace the origins of the project so as to give some practical suggestions to others who may like to make low budget activist video. At the same time that I discuss the process of making and distributing the videotape, IN PLAIN ENGLISH: STUDENTS OF COLOR SPEAK OUT, I will also reflect on some theoretical and political issues involved in my documentary practice. If, by playing the devil's advocate and being my own harshest critic, I can critique social action media and its using "witnesses" and their narratives within that media, perhaps I can also establish a certain healthy skepticism or tension with which this book of narratives should be read.

Hopefully, the reader of this book will grant these students of color the status of "expert" witnesses as they critique educational institutions. But the reader should also grant them the right to be more complex individuals than either they or I chose to present. Social issues and the people who present them publicly are always greater than the narratives told to explicate these issues and to generate social change. In the process of reading the narratives told here by students of color at the University of Oregon, the wiser reader will go on to question how history is written and how it is continually being made.

THE PROCESS OF MAKING "IN PLAIN ENGLISH"

In 1989 as a faculty member in Telecommunications and Film at the University of Oregon, I was asked to participate in the President's Task Force on Affirmative Action. Meeting after meeting of that group featured eloquent testimony from faculty of color. Yet even though faculty of color participated actively in the Task Force, all the minutes of that group and its final report were written in a bureaucratic prose that flattened out the key issues and the urgency with which they were originally expressed. Faculty of color understand how academic institutions and the knowledge these institutions purvey are constituted as white, as European American, in the United States. Yet the Task Force erased this perception and in a limited way wanted to address "problems" rather than come to terms with this faculty's sense of identity based on a consciousness of race. To that end, a major issue the group as a whole could deal with was the work load of faculty of color.

Since there are very few professors and instructors of color on campus, this faculty must mentor the students of color, serve--often as tokens--on all the major campus committees, and work in community affairs off campus. In addition to all this, they are expected to advance as fast as white faculty in their professional fields, even though many of them accept as much responsibility to publish in newspapers and journals that reach their ethnic communities as to publish in the "refereed" publications that have prestige for academic advancement. Because there are so few faculty of color on our campus, all of them face daily the pressure to represent their race, both as precious role models for students of color and in a more tokenized way for the campus at large.

Frustrated with the way the Task Force ignored the faculty of color's underlying assumptions about how a university functions, I went to the head of Affirmative Action, Diane Wong, and proposed making a videotape about this faculty. I said it would be more faithful to what they had spoken about than the Task Force's report had been. Wong easily convinced me that the students of color had even less voice than the faculty and would be a better focus for such a tape. This was the beginning of IN PLAIN ENGLISH.

I first discussed the video project with the faculty and staff of color, who gave me crucial assistance and advice. They told me to work closely with the student unions, which represent the major ethnic groups on campus. I was glad that I followed that advice. The student leaders interviewed for IN PLAIN ENGLISH had developed their own cogent analyses of the educational system, and each of the student unions consequently used the tape and promoted it extensively.

Even more important, a staff person who had worked years organizing anti-discrimination workshops also wanted to make such a tape with students of color. She worked as associate producer on this project, seeing it through from the pre-interview stage to the final script. This was Dianna Kale, a Native American academic staff person in the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Kale and other faculty of color helped recruit students for pre-interviews and later for videotaped interviews (the two sets of interviews were conducted about a year apart), and Kale did most of the interviewing. Her ongoing work with students of color meant that her analysis informed the interview process, and her familiarity with the student as individuals meant they felt comfortable talking about a whole range of issues with her that they might not have discussed in the same intimate way with me.

I wrote and distributed a statement of the project's goals and procedures, seeking to establish an equitable contractual basis for dealing with the students and faculty who would work on the project. In this letter to the students, I affirmed that I would give any profits over and above production and advertising costs to a fund for scholarships for students of color. I explained what releases were and that I would be asking for releases for both the pre-interviews and interviews, which were to be copyright in my name. The issue of copyright was important as it was the only way to guarantee that university administrators could have no control over the project even though individual academic units might contribute material support. I also told all the faculty and administrators I spoke to that I would maintain copyright; that I would seek input from them up until the time of production, at which point I would take control of the process; and that I would give the students who appeared in the tape veto power over their final appearance.

I have made social action media for many years, and in this case was aware of the need for an oppositional work dealing with campus racism. It had to be a tape which would have an ongoing life within the university community. As it turned out, the process of making the tape led me to interrogate my own authority vis-a-vis the students. When I first discussed the project with the head of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, a Mexican American, he was suspicious of my motives. "What will you get out of it?" he asked. I answered, "Recognition among my peers in the media community for making an

aesthetically accomplished tape, and being known among my fellow teachers as a good and moral person." The moral impulse led me originally to name the tape "a videotape to combat racism on campus." But quickly it became clear that that title--"combat racism"--meant I'd conceived of the issues primarily from a white perspective and had not imagined the wider spectrum of issues that students of color would address when speaking from their point of view. In general, the project had the support of students of color from beginning to end, although it was only at the stage of the final taping that students called me to ask to be included. Many groups in struggle want a "video about their group," and it was on that level that the student unions first approved of the project's existence and goals.

As a media professional and a university professor, I have the authority to make a videotape, gather assistance for its production, apply for grants, control its final structure, and prepare a plan for its distribution. I accepted this role and made it explicit from the very beginning. Another videomaker jokingly countered my scruples about democratic process with, "You can say it will be a collaborative project. Just hold a few script meetings, and by the fourth one, you'll be left alone doing the tape anyway." In fact, it is because I am committed to social action media and have reflected on some of the pitfalls that accompany a naive commitment to collaborative process that I try to delineate structures of authority and responsibility from the very beginning of a video project. I am concerned to finish a production in a timely way and see its effective use. Because I maintain production control, I can work very economically, set deadlines, pay for most of the costs up to the on-line edit out of my own pocket, and distribute the work at no profit, making extensive use of cable access television showings. The tape cost about \$5,000 to shoot, edit, and duplicate 200 VHS copies, and it took two years from the time of doing the audiotaped preinterviews to the tape's premiere on campus. Because it takes years to make an inexpensive, independent video production, done alongside one's paid work, it is important to conceive of the subject matter and its presentation in a way that will not become quickly outdated. And it is also useful to be ready to give away even more copies than generate money in sales.

As I make social action media, it is clear that there are certain power relations in making such media that must be acknowledged but can never completely be overcome. I created a space for the students' voices to be heard and a tape that they could use, but in a production process which I established and controlled. Although I gave the students feedback mechanisms, veto power, and points of input, there were crucial points at which I made the political decisions. Sometimes I made decisions to highlight or enhance certain social contradictions and other times to flatten contradictions out. Such a process occurs in making any documentary media. Here, for example, I chose to present in the tape two men and two women from each of the racial categories established by the Affirmative Action Guidelines of the United States Government: Native American, African American, Asian American, and Chicano/Latino. [Three Native American women and no men came for the videotaped interviews. Mostly women serve in the leadership of the Native American Student Union.] Race is a precarious category. Here, using the U.S government's classifications establishes the tape's contemporary goal to intervene in current social process and to modify institutional structures, especially in a college setting. On the negative side, that choice

also imputes a fixed identity to and lumping together of ethnic subcultures and it downplays many students' mixed racial backgrounds. In addition, none of the students who appear in the tape say, "I've never had any problems with racism," although there are certainly some fairer-skinned or economically privileged students of color on campus who would say that.

After the tape had been in circulation a year, a black graduate student working in the Affirmative Action Office criticized me for showing mainly student leaders, many of them officers of the ethnic student unions. She said that since the student unions worked closely together on race issues, their spokespeople were known for having "a line." For me as a documentary media maker, the student leaders' articulateness and confidence in presenting themselves on camera were key qualities necessary for on-camera interviews. Furthermore, as an activist working for social change, I have confidence in the analyses worked out by groups in struggle. I conceive of the voices in the tape as sometimes presenting a group analysis, one articulated by student leaders working on behalf of other students of color who rely on the ethnic student unions to express their collectively felt points of view.

As a feminist media maker, gender issues have a political importance to me, and they did for many of the students in the tape. Both in terms of gender balance in the original selection of interviewees and in the kinds of things emphasized in the editing, I brought my own political analysis to bear on the tape. I disagreed with my co-producer, Dianna Kale, about gender issues in crucial ways--especially about the importance of women's studies, which several of the students discussed at length, and about one student's asserting her identity as lesbian and black. I take responsibility for the final presentation of the issues, but there was always a tension between my imagination and cultural presuppositions and those of Dianna Kale and the students we interviewed. Even though I used no external scripted narration, this documentary--like all documentaries--subtly interprets the experiences the students relate. I felt a tension around these political and cultural issues throughout the whole process, from preproduction through editing.

When I began the project, I wanted to make clear to myself my responsibilities as a white faculty person and videomaker to the campus community of color. Following from that experience on the Affirmative Action Task Force, I knew that faculty and students of color have to teach the whole campus the same things about race over and over, always starting from zero. Students of color must constantly teach the structures of racism to others when they should be in school to learn. In *IN PLAIN ENGLISH*, students of color spoke to the camera in order to make a videotape that could be used many times. I consider this tape the equivalent of the panel discussions on which so many students of color serve. I thought that minimally the student unions could request a showing of the tape before they were to appear on a panel, so hopefully the discussion of racial issues could start off on a more advanced plane. On other occasions, the student union might just recommend that a teacher show the tape instead of expecting that organization to send a representative to her class to explain racism. There is a great value in making a tape that can be used locally by small groups who have a chance to discuss it afterward. In media terms, this is called narrowcasting (in contrast to broadcasting), and it creates different conditions for viewer reception than merely

seeing something on television, which establishes the viewing as taking place within the parameters of entertainment.

For the students who worked on the tape, their participation empowered them. It enhanced their own sense of identity and their commitment to social action. Many of them had had high expectations about college life before they came to the University of Oregon, only to realize later how unaccommodating both the curriculum and college life really were. As the university is described through their eyes, they produce a new discourse about education. They understand what Michel Foucault would call the regime of truth in the university. But their analyses also imply the possibility of constructing a new curriculum, a new discourse about education, and a new politics of "truth." They speak to educate the campus at large and especially to empower other students of color who view the tape to define their sense of what education is and should be.

The tape has had the following life at the University of Oregon. It is often used in the classroom where it takes on the authority of the curriculum. In the library, two copies of the tape circulate constantly, due to high demand. I do not know if that use is mostly in or out of class, but the existence of the tapes in the library provides support for students, faculty, and staff who seek oppositional educational materials. The tape's circumscribed, more or less permanent presence on campus is a token of a small amount of power gained by the students who spoke in the tape. It gives an extension to their voices, which will be heard and discussed in more sites and over a longer period of time than the students could ever have reached themselves.

In terms of what I myself have gained, I have found a satisfying tactic to challenge the institutional framework of the university. In my social relations with peers and administrators, my production of this tape stands as a commentary on my intellectual and artistic priorities. As a documentarist and media activist, I find it satisfying to invent new tactics for using consumer format media to introduce stress and movement into the foundations of academia.

THE TAPE

IN PLAIN ENGLISH is a talking heads tape. Students were shot in close up against gray photographic paper. I used a very simple format of well-lit close ups so that all the interviews could easily be edited together and so the tape would look professional and well made. The lighting was controlled, the students knew what issues were going to be discussed, and they chose how they wanted to dress. I used this constrained format so as to get the best possible image and lighting from VHS shooting, but also because it lent the students authority and dignity. In contrast, I rejected the use of cinema verite, which has long been used as a realist format to capture the lives and milieu of the underclass, since its impromptu shooting style gives the viewer a false sense of superiority to the chaos of the world that is shot.

The questions asked by Dianna Kale are not heard in the edited version of the tape, but her voice of encouragement or laughter is. Neither the students' names nor ethnicity is

given until the end of the tape. Segments from various interviews related to a given theme are edited up against each other, so that the argument flows as a whole. Often students disagree or do not have similar experiences. Sometimes their experiences are related to skin color, sometimes to gender (for example, the darker skinned men are harassed by police; the fairer-skinned women of color are treated as exotic). However, with a unified voice, the students denounce Eurocentrism in the curriculum and being expected constantly to represent their whole race.

In all my media practice, I avoid a voice-of-God, external, scripted narration, and I also warn students against using it. By letting the argument be carried by the voices of the people actually involved in an issue, the videomaker gives them the right to be protagonists of the mass media, the right to artistic status. They are shown as the ones who have knowledge to convey, and their voices in the interviews connote authority and presence.

In contrast, an anonymous voice-over, often used in the news and in educational media, traces out a single issue following a single line of argument; such a voice-over takes upon itself the right to fill in the background and give facts anonymously yet authoritatively, and it posits the solutions to the problems. The students who speak in this tape frequently do not have the same opinion on a given topic, and when I found such contradictions, I enhanced them by the editing.

The tape opens with students talking about their expectations when they came to the university and their subsequent frustration. Internally, their anecdotes are often told in a chronological order, but the editing is synchronic, slicing across the interviews so as to make the students speak to specific themes, concerns which they have in common. Intertitles introduce the sections: IDENTIFICATION, LABELS, COLOR, LANGUAGE, CURRICULUM, FACULTY OF COLOR, IN THE CLASSROOM, ON CAMPUS AND IN TOWN, SUBTLETIES, THE WHOLE RACE, EMPOWERING.

This kind of segmentation is both similar to and different from that of television news. It is intended to enhance the audience's understanding of the subjective experiences of the students of color and of the structures which have shaped those students' lives. Today's viewer is media savvy and can read many different kinds of contrapuntal or segmented editing, but too rarely is editing used to teach social structure and contradiction. In this tape, the segmentation presents arguments and disagreements. It gives a feel of impartiality even though it is a mechanism for intellectually organizing and selecting parts of the interviews. The segmentation also subtly uses emotion and offers a way for the tape to move from the students' early life and education to their current strategies of protest and fighting back. In creating these categories, I drew the intertitles from the testimonies, building an argument out of the students' words.

As a whole, the tape is expository and argumentative, with a call to take a public stand. As Roman Jakobson has described it, every discourse promotes an attitude towards its message. In this tape, the argument, with all its internal diversity, proposes an implied mental set on the part of the viewer if s/he is properly to receive the work. Bertolt Brecht put it another way: a politically effective work divides the audience along class lines. In

this instance, the tape is intended to provoke the university audience to challenge dominant structures in the school and in the surrounding town. If you "get" the tape as you watch it, you are expected to take a stand against racism.

The tape emphasizes the difference between the way the students of color see the university environment and the way that institution sees itself. Any minority culture or oppressed group has to know the ways of thinking and the mores of the dominant culture, but this does not result in reciprocal understanding. Students of color who see the tape feel empowered at seeing the strength of students who have mastered both ways of thinking; white viewers often resist the demand that they as well conceptualize their educational process in terms of race. The students of color in the tape contest the structures of knowledge proposed in the classroom, the behavior of fellow students, and the reduction of their identity to issues of race. They understand the mechanisms of ideology, and they challenge the general basis of consent in the university. For me as a videomaker, working collaboratively with these students while financing the project independently let us create a small space for cultural resistance. Since this kind of videomaking is not profit-making, it can say something contestatory, something intellectually challenging which can appeal to a university audience with rigor and freshness of approach. In a certain sense, both the project as a whole and the individual students in it are utopian in outlook, calling for and anticipating the possibility of urgently needed change.

In terms of the visual style, IN PLAIN ENGLISH presents a rapid procession of faces, of a variety of ethnicities and colors. One man who looks very Anglo discusses Latino issues. A Black woman says because she looks "normal," she thinks it is important to be out as lesbian. A Chicana says people mistake her for Italian. Color is interrogated both by the students in the tape and by the viewer. The use of close ups and a neutral background reduces connotation. Because of the primacy of the verbal argument, the voice-face relation invites fantasy. We are confronted with what we guess about the students and what they tell us about themselves, and when the end credits come up, we are confronted again with some of our previous projections, especially about race, mixed race background, immigrants, and color.

In terms of self-presentation, the students have a certain performance style. It is that of young adult leaders, aware that they must shape what they say in a certain way for their words to be accepted, especially within white society, and for their ideas to be broadly useful. They came to be interviewed and wanted to help make the tape primarily because they have long had a desire to see people of color as socially accepted protagonists, as subjects of media narratives and of educational curricula. They have no intention of telling a sad story and playing the victim, a role which affixes them in an inferior and pitiable place. They understand how the dominated and poor are offered up as reduced, feminized objects of knowledge, where they are spoken of and for. They are also suspicious of the anonymity of case studies and questionnaires of social science research. They tell their stories to the camera with the insistence that it be their story, their history, told under their own name.

In their verbal style, the students are authoritative and articulate. As student leaders of the ethnic student unions, they are what Antonio Gramsci would call organic intellectuals. They want to be part of the process of making meaning that goes on in a university. They articulate a certain subcultural analysis about issues that are known as givens in their community but not acknowledged by the dominant culture. Their knowledge is, however, a subcultural wisdom too painful for dominant white culture, especially in a liberal bourgeois university environment, to acknowledge as daily reality. They come from oppressed groups that have already articulated a history, a version of daily life, and a passing on of survival skills. Among students of color on campus circulate meanings and ways of articulating historical reality that are excluded from dominant discourse. It is an alternative vision which circulates in a scattered way, officially repressed, but which represents a new kind of knowledge which students and faculty of color have to offer to the university. They can provide alternative cognitive maps with which to interpret the "college experience." I wanted the tape to elicit and present the kinds of knowledge these students have developed through political and racial struggles, in their shared experiences within the university system, and in their cohesiveness with other students of color with whom they form a support group.

For these students, participating in the tape was an empowering experience. They saw their personal stories gain force by being communicated openly and put together as a collective public statement. When the project started, some university administrators were worried that tape would just be "angry," and ironically they have subsequently expressed gratitude at how serious and thoughtful the students are. I framed the students as authorities, as intellectuals about the university process, and placed a primacy on their voices. They were given the chance to prepare what they wanted to say and how they wanted to dress. They and I saw their performance in this tape as a public event.

Although the anecdotes told in the tape are lively and imagistic, and the students seem cohesive "subjects" whose image invites projection, what they say presents a conflict of discourses. Their subjectivities navigate a world unacknowledged by hegemonic notions of "reality." Previously denied the role of "hero," they now seek to be the subjects of law and culture. However, the tape depicts an alternate kind of production of the subject. The students of color speak not as the "oppressed" but as the "people," a people struggling for power. The tape points to the possibility that the viewer's "completion" will not come in watching it but only in joining in the struggle beyond the tape. In that sense, the students' voices and their faces of "color," reconstitute the imaginary and establish as desirable a realm in which we and they can be politically engaged.

WHAT A VIDEOTAPE CAN AND CANNOT DO

This repressed subcultural coding of groups in struggle which competes with and challenges dominant versions of reality has always fascinated me in my video work. For me it provides the basis on which to make media that has an efficacy in its oppositional stance. I am often emotionally drawn in by but ultimately suspicious of family-of-man type works which wallow in the pathos of oppression while protesting that oppression with the claim that "we are all basically human" or "we are all basically alike." To watch

IN PLAIN ENGLISH the audience has to question its notions of typicality and to learn what might be typical or not for a student of color. The images and the things the people say in the tape elicit a constant reflection on color, voice, and gender all at once.

Yet I and the tape I make claim a certain authority to represent general issues and human concerns. Like the news, the tape as a whole implicitly argues for the validity of its argument, yet I partially masks authorship by using talking heads as a phenomenological guarantee, seeming to make the witnesses the source of the argument. The students are presented as a sampling, a cross section, the "common citizen," with a kind of democracy in the gathering and presenting of testimony and evidence. This tape, like all documentaries, has an artistic coherence in which connotations are reduced for sake of argument. The technical procedures themselves provide coherence, such as the framing in close up and the placing of the microphone which function anthropomorphically to give a sense of intimacy.

All of these media tactics reinforce what is one of the subtlest and most dangerous aspects of visual media, its power to keep the audience feeling transcendent, superior, and benevolent. I worry that the tape's being used in the classroom might make an "object of study" out of the people in the tape, dishing them up for bourgeois intellectual consumption and keeping them in a position of perpetual subordination to the tape's viewers. I want someone to take responsibility for the pain the students of color constantly face but I know that no viewer will do that. Yet I also cannot fully embrace modernist video practices which challenge all identification. As John Tagg has pointed out, such artistic practices are also reductive, abstractions that border on claims to universality, works that need a critic or an interview with the artist to explain their formal construction.

As IN PLAIN ENGLISH is used on campus and discussed in classes, it both opens up and delimits paths for actions. Inevitably some issues and contradictions, especially the most painful ones, will never get addressed. More important to me is the fact that the students who spoke in the tape addressed themselves to the larger, white world. What gets lost here is the conversation of a people or peoples who would have had a different style of talking and would have addressed different issues had they been talking among themselves.

Chicana philosopher Maria Lugones addressed this problem when she spoke at the University of Oregon. She told us that she and her peers in the Women of Color Caucus in the Society for Women in Philosophy had decided that they had addressed their writing and speaking primarily to a (white male) academic audience and not to each other, but from now on they would speak and write for women of color, and others could just eavesdrop. I know that the students who made IN PLAIN ENGLISH had a great sense of service and that they felt the best way to improve the campus climate around racial issues was to once again or maybe once and for all educate the campus at large. As heard in their narratives, they generously use the word "ignorance" to explain overtly racist behavior. As a result, the tape has as its mode of discourse "direct address to white people with viewers of color getting something more." Some time in the future, I would like to use my media skills to assist the making of a tape which has as its mode of

discourse, "a conversation among ourselves which you can listen in on but might not understand."

As the tape uses certain processes of identification, hopefully the viewers expand their sympathies, their subjectivities. In the tape itself, the speaker's subjectivity and the story s/he has to tell are always interrelated but the overall relation between subjectivity and objectivity is always subtly shifting and read differently by different viewers. The value of these students' personal narratives is that they might affect a rewriting of the historical narrative, seen in larger terms. The project has been something small, a few individuals' stories put together in an inexpensively produced videotape, but it seems to have had a limited, beneficial effect in challenging what Michel Foucault would call the regime of truth in this university, the economic and political role it plays in defining what knowledge is. The students in *IN PLAIN ENGLISH* and in this book offer the possibility of constructing a new curriculum, a new discourse about education, and a new politics of truth. Their narratives let students and faculty see some new structures they had not seen before. In the ongoing relation between subjective and objective factors, between understanding and emotion and social organization in any movement leading to social change, it is because these students had been organized in the ethnic student unions and struggling around issues of campus racism that they saw the need for this videotape. And now the videotape has its own active life far beyond the reach of the students in it or of me.